

Paper warns project leaders over growing risk of ‘strategic misrepresentation’

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The Association for Project Management (APM) has released new guidance warning project professionals about the growing impact of “strategic misrepresentation” on project performance, governance and decision-making.

The new paper, *The Big Bad Wolves in Your Projects or Programmes: Strategic Misrepresentation and What to Do About It*, examines how projects are sometimes deliberately presented more positively than evidence supports in order to secure approval, funding or stakeholder backing.

According to APM, the issue represents one of the most significant behavioural risks facing projects and programmes today, particularly across large-scale infrastructure and transformation initiatives.

Strategic misrepresentation can include the selective interpretation of project data, deliberate framing of information to influence decision-makers, or the introduction of flawed delivery constraints designed to support a preferred outcome.

Unlike forecasting errors or poor estimation, the paper emphasises that strategic misrepresentation involves conscious deception.

A persistent challenge in major projects

The issue has been widely associated with the work of Professor Bent Flyvbjerg, whose research into megaproject delivery identified strategic misrepresentation as a major contributor to cost overruns, delays, governance failures and poor investment decisions.

APM's new paper argues that project failure is rarely caused by a single misleading statement or decision. Instead, it is often driven by multiple connected distortions that gradually create and sustain a false narrative around project viability or performance.

The guidance suggests these behaviours can emerge from several sources, including:

- Organisational pressure
- Political agendas
- Unconscious bias
- Fear of challenge
- Incentives linked to approval or funding
- Poor governance cultures

The paper also highlights how language itself can become a delivery risk.

According to the report, the way projects are framed and described can significantly shape how stakeholders perceive risk, progress and viability. Simplified messaging, selective wording and biased framing can all influence decision-making long before delivery begins.

Project leaders urged to challenge narratives earlier

The paper, produced by the APM Governance Interest Network, calls on project leaders to identify warning signs earlier and create environments where assumptions and narratives can be challenged constructively.

Among the practical recommendations are:

- Introducing structured challenge points during key project stages
- Creating space for reflection during approvals and gateway reviews
- Recording assumptions and decision rationale transparently
- Encouraging critical feedback and independent scrutiny
- Improving awareness of behavioural bias and framing techniques

The paper identifies several high-risk moments where misrepresentation is most likely to emerge, including:

- Initial project pitches
- Pre-business case development
- Funding approvals
- Stage gate reviews
- Change control processes

For project managers and sponsors, the guidance reinforces the importance of governance structures that support transparency rather than simply accelerating approval cycles.

AI presents both opportunity and risk

The report also raises concerns about how artificial intelligence and automated reporting systems could affect the problem.

While AI has the potential to improve visibility, automate assurance processes and reduce human bias, APM warns that poorly governed AI systems could equally amplify misinformation if flawed assumptions or biased data are embedded into automated reporting processes.

Carol Deveney from the APM Governance Interest Network said the increasing use of AI makes the issue even more relevant.

“Projects of all kinds and all sizes are at risk of strategic misrepresentation,” she said.

“The advent of AI, along with increasing system and reporting automation, presents an opportunity to address this risk or to amplify it.”

She added that the paper was developed to help project professionals better understand both the behavioural and organisational drivers behind strategic misrepresentation, while also providing practical techniques suitable for projects of all sizes.

Governance increasingly under scrutiny

The publication arrives at a time when governance standards across major programmes are facing growing scrutiny globally.

Large infrastructure projects, digital transformations and public sector programmes continue to face mounting pressure over delivery confidence, cost escalation and stakeholder trust.

For project professionals, the report reinforces a broader industry shift: successful delivery increasingly depends not only on technical execution, but also on behavioural leadership, organisational culture and governance maturity.

Because increasingly, the greatest project risks are not always hidden in the schedules or budgets — but in the stories organisations choose to tell themselves about whether a project is truly viable in the first place.